DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 251 768 CG 017 897

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TITLE Topic Control as Relational Control and Its Effects on Counseling Outcome.
PUB DATE 25 Aug 84
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (92nd, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, August 24-28, 1984).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Counseling Effectiveness; *Counselor Client Relationship; Counselors; Interaction Process Analysis; *Interpersonal Communication
IDENTIFIERS Topic Changes; *Topic Control

ABSTRACT

Haley (1963) described the counseling relationship in terms of the patterns of communicative behavior exchanged by the interactants. To investigate Haley's assertion that successful counseling is characterized by the counselor's control of the definition of the counseling relationship as a complementary relationship in which the counselor is in a "one-up" position, an analysis of counselor-client transactions for Topic Control was conducted. Trained raters assessed 18 full case transcripts of actual counseling interviews. The same transcripts were also analyzed by trained raters for client change over the course of treatment. The results did not support the notion that across successful dyads counselors exhibit a greater measure of Topic Control than clients; nor did they support the hypothesis that across successful and unsuccessful counselors, successful counselors exhibit a greater measure of Topic Control. There was no support to show that across successful and unsuccessful clients, unsuccessful clients exhibit a greater measure of Topic Control. Finally, the results did not support the notion that across unsuccessful dyads, clients exhibit greater Topic Control than counselors. (Author/JAC)

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ED251769

Topic Control as Relational Control and its Effects on Counseling Outcome

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Paper presented at the annual convention of the American Psychological Association, Toronto, CANADA: August 25, 1984.

CG 017897

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Abstract

The concept of relational control was measured using the index of Topic Control to investigate Haley's assertion that successful counseling is characterized by the counselor controlling the definition of the counseling relationship and defining it as a complementary relationship in which the counselor is in a "one-up" position. Specifically, following Haley's assertion, it was hypothesized that: (a) across a sample of successful counseling dyads, counselors exhibit a greater measure of Topic Control than clients; (b) across a sample of successful and unsuccessful counselors, successful counselors exhibit a greater measure of Topic Control than unsuccessful counselors; (c) across a sample of successful and unsuccessful clients, unsuccessful clients exhibit a greater measure of Topic Control than successful clients; and (d) across a sample of unsuccessful counseling dyads, clients exhibit a greater measure of Topic Control than counselors.

An analysis of counselor-client transactions for Topic Control was conducted by trained raters across 18 full case transcripts of actual counseling interviews. The same transcripts were also analyzed by trained raters with respect to client change over the course of treatment.

The results did not support the notion that across successful dyads counselors exhibit a greater measure of Topic Control than clients; nor did they support the hypothesis that across successful and unsuccessful counselors, successful counselors exhibit a greater measure of Topic Control; nor was there support to show that across successful and unsuccessful clients, unsuccessful clients exhibit a greater measure of Topic Control. Finally, the results did not support that across unsuccessful dyads, clients exhibit greater Topic Control than counselors.

Topic Control as Relational Control and its Effects on Counseling Outcome

This study was designed to investigate the role of the counseling relationship on counseling outcome. In contrast to the usual notions of the therapeutic relationship (e.g., Goldstein, 1980; Kell & Mueller, 1966; Mitchell, Bozarth, Krauft, 1977; Roger, 1957; Truax & Carkhuff, 1967), Haley (1963) describes interpersonal relationships (and the counseling relationship in particular) as a function of a person's ongoing communication with another, i.e., in terms of the patterns of communicative behavior (messages) exchanged by the interactants.

Based on the notion that all behavior is communication (Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson, 1967), Haley asserts that to communicate a message to another is essentially a maneuver to define the relationship. This maneuver will either support the status quo vis-a-vis the definition of the relationship, or offer a change in its definition. When one maneuvers to redefine a relationship, it is tantamount to attempting to control the relationship. It should be understood that "control" in this sense does not mean direct control over another's behavior per se. Instead, it is a control over the definition of the relationship.

Assuming the inevitability of communication, Haley emphasizes that one cannot avoid being involved in a struggle over the definition of the relationship. In the same sense that one cannot not communicate, people are continuously involved in either supporting the status quo or trying to redefine their relationships. To communicate is inevitably to indicate the type of relationship one is attempting to establish with another. As a correlary to the axiom that persons cannot not communicate

(Watzlawick, et al., 1967), these same theorists propose that it is impossible for persons to avoid defining or exercising control over the definition of their relationships with others. Even if one tries not to influence another person by remaining silent, the silence bears a message about the nature of the relationship and defines the relationship.

Stepping back from the individual communicative behaviors of the interactants, one may discern two particular patterns of communication: patterns of communicative behavior that tend to define a relationship as symmetrical, or behaviors that tend to define the relationship as complementary. Symmetry (or symmetrical relationship patterns) is based upon equality of roles or the attempt to minimize the differences between the interactants. In a symmetrical relationship, people exchange the same type of behaviors.

Complementarity (or complementary relationship patterns) are based upon the inequality of participant roles or the maximization of differences. The term "complementary" is descriptive of the roles persons play in an interaction--their actions complement each other. Rather than sameness or symmetry of roles or behaviors as in a symmetrical relationship, in a complementary relationship inequality exists. Culturally or contextually one of the interactants is considered in a superior or "one-up" position. The other, by definition, is in the "one-down" or secondary position.

As people maneuver to define and redefine their relationships with one another, they constantly face the question of whose relationship definition will prevail. In any kind of relationship, people develop certain relational maneuvers and ways of dealing with this issue.

Looking specifically within relationships which are problematic, however, "symptomatic" behaviors may be viewed as a particular class of maneuvers which are used to gain control and predictability in relationships.

It is Haley's belief (also see Cashdan, 1973) that when clients enter counseling, the same "pathological" maneuvers clients use to gain control of other relationships will also manifest themselves in counseling to control that relationship. Haley asserts that if clients are permitted to control the definition of the counseling relationship, their difficulties (i.e., symptomatic behavior) will only be maintained.

Haley proposes that it is of crucial importance that the counselor deal successfully with the issue of who will control the relationship. In particular, Haley asserts that successful counseling is characterized by the counselor being in control of the definition of the counseling relationship and thereby defining it as a complementary relationship in which the counselor is in a "one-up" position.

Despite the fact that Haley's assumptions about the relationship between control and therapeutic outcome were first published almost 20 years ago, there is only one empirically based study testing the validity of Haley's assumption. Lichtenberg and Barké (1981), drawing on the previous work of Sluzki and Beavin (1965), Mark (1971), and Erickson and Rogers (1973), addressed Haley's assumption that successful counseling (defined as that exemplified by Rogers, Perls and Ellis in the film series, Three approaches to psychotherapy) is characterized by a complementary relationship between counselor and client where the counselor is in the one-up position. Results of their study failed to support the hypothesis that successful counseling is characterized by such a relationship, at least within those initial interviews.

A related study of relational typologies and counselor-client role expectations was conducted by Tracey, Heck and Lichtenberg (1982). Predicated on the notion that the primary behavior in a therapeutic relationship is the transmission of verbal messages, relational control was defined in terms of who determined what topic(s) would be discussed during the counseling encounter. "Topic Determination" was defined as the proportion of topic change successes to topic change initiations. A topic change initiation was said to have occurred when one of the participants changed the topic of the conversation. A topic change success occurred when the second participant followed the first person's topical lead. By dividing the number of successes by the number of initiations for each person, a topic change success ratio was established. In the counseling dyad, the person with the a greater success ratio was said to have controlled the topics of the interview and consequently the definition of the relationship.

Drawing from the above two studies, it was the purpose of this study to investigate Haley's assertion that successful counseling depends on the counselor maintaining topic (and thus, relational) control within counseling. To test this assertion, four hypotheses were proposed. Specifically, it was hypothesized that:

1. The mean percentage of control for counselors across the successful outcome group would be significantly greater than the mean percentage of control for the clients of the same group.
2. The mean percentage of control for counselors from the successful outcome group would be significantly greater

than the mean percentage of control for counselors from the unsuccessful outcome group.

3. The mean percentage of control for subjects in the unsuccessful outcome group would be significantly greater than the mean percentage of control for subjects in the successful outcome group.

4. The mean percentage of control for subjects in the unsuccessful outcome group would be significantly greater than the mean percentage of control for counselors in the unsuccessful outcome group.

Method

Subjects

Client subjects were 12 males and 6 females -- actual clients at the counseling center of a major midwestern university. The counselor subjects were staff members of the counseling center (6 males, 1 female). Two of the staff were doctoral level counselors; the remaining five were advanced doctoral students in counseling.

When paired (counselor with client), there were a total of 18 full-length counseling cases for analysis (average number of sessions = 3; range = 2-10). The actual data for analysis were derived from verbatim transcripts of the counselor-client interaction.

Measures

Topic Control Index. The procedure used to index relational control and thereby complementary "one-upmanship" was a modification of Tracey's index of topic determination (Tracey, et al., 1982).

The unit of analysis used in this study was the utterance, defined as anything spoken by one person between verbalizations by the second

person. Each utterance was coded as either following (F) or not following (N) the preceding speaker's utterance with respect to topical content. Utterances satisfying any one of seven criteria of topic change initiation (see Table 1) were credited to the speaker as an N or topic initiation.

Insert Table 1 about here

If the subsequent utterance satisfied any of the topic change initiation criteria, then it too was coded N; if not, it was coded F (follow) -- indicating that the second person followed the first speaker's topical lead. N indicated that the first person's topic was not followed. Anytime a person's N utterance was followed by an F utterance, the N/F combination was interpreted as a successful topic change initiation and the speaker whose utterance was coded N credited with the successful topic change. An N/N combination was interpreted as an unsuccessful topic change initiation. In the event of multiple sentence utterances, the first and last sentences of the utterance were used for purposes of coding the utterance. The first sentence was used to determine whether it followed (F) or did not follow (N) the preceding utterance. The last sentence was used in determining whether the subsequent speaker's utterance followed (F) or did not follow (N) topically.

Following a training period to a high level of interrater agreement (90%), the first author and an assistant analyzed the transcriptions of the 18 cases for Topic Control. Because of the quantity of material to the analyzed, each rater individually coded only nine of 18 cases. Subsequently, however, the first author also analyzed five of the cases

coded by the assistant. The index of interrater reliability (kappa, see Cohen, 1960) on the set of five cases analyzed by both raters was k = .53 (kappa maximum = .89).

The total number of N/F and N/N combinations was tallied for both the counselor and the client for each full-length case. Each speaker's total number of successful topic change initiations (N/F) was divided by his/her grand total of attempts to change the topic (N/F + N/N) to yielded that person's percentage (ratio) of successful topic change initiations.

Index of Outcome. In addition to being analyzed on the topic control dimension, each of the 18 counseling cases was rated as "successful" or "unsuccessful" in terms of counseling outcome. Based on their reading of the full-length transcript of each case, two raters independently identified the problem(s) presented in the case in the order presented by the client. Then using a 0-3 rating scale (see Table 2), the raters scored each problem (up to a maximum of three problems) as to its degree of improvement (outcome).

Insert Table 2 about here

The scores for each case were then averaged to yield a global outcome index for that case. Scores of 2 or above were taken as an index of a "successful" case; scores of less than 2 were taken as an index of an "unsuccessful" case.

As above, an assistant analyzed one set of nine cases and the first author the second set of nine. Subsequently, the first author also rated the first nine cases for the purpose of establishing interrater

agreement. For the outcome index, the two raters were in 100% agreement on the number of problems identified and problem areas identified for the nine cases they jointly rated. The outcome rating scores for problems within a case were averaged for each case and an index of interrater agreement of $r = .93$ was obtained between the two raters.

Data analysis

Each of the four previously stated hypotheses was analyzed by a t-test for independent samples. Each test was directional, comparing the mean percentage of control of the specific groups in accordance with the stated hypothesis. The level of significance for each of the four tests was set at $p<.05$.

Results

The means and standard deviations for successful and unsuccessful counseling dyads on the topic control index are presented in Table 3.

.Insert Table 3 about here

Hypothesis 1 was a test of Haley's assumption that successful counseling is characterized by the counselor being in control of the definition of the relationship with respect to the client, thereby defining the relationship as complementary with the counselor in the "one-up" position. Failure to reject the null hypothesis in this instance [t (12) = .758, $p > .05$] suggests that statistically speaking there is no significant difference between counselors and clients in the amount of Topic Control when the results of the counseling are successful. Retaining the null hypothesis means there was insufficient support from

the data to suggest that a successful counseling relationship is characterized as complementary with the counselor being in control "one-up" of the relationship with the client.

Hypothesis 2 tested the idea that across successful and unsuccessful cases it is reasonable to expect successful counselors to have a greater level of control than unsuccessful counselors. Failure to reject the null hypothesis in this instance [t (16) = .435, $p > .05$] suggests that there is not a statistically significant difference in Topic Control between counselors from successful and unsuccessful counseling dyads. It is not reasonable to conclude from this example that successful counselors demonstrate a significantly greater percentage of Topic Control that unsuccessful counselors.

Hypothesis 3 tested the idea that across successful and unsuccessful cases it is reasonable to expect unsuccessful clients to have a greater level of control than successful clients. Failure to reject the null hypothesis in this instance [t (16) = .663, $p > .05$] suggests that across different groups of subjects, those from successful and those from unsuccessful counseling experiences, there is not a statistically significant difference in the overall percentage of Topic Control exercised by each group. Based on this data it does not appear reasonable to believe that unsuccessful clients exert more Topic Control than successful clients.

Hypothesis 4 was based on the notion that within the unsuccessful group it is reasonable to expect to find greater client control than counselor control given Haley's assumption regarding relational control in successful counseling. Failure to reject the null hypothesis in this instance [t (20) = 1.378, $p > .05$] suggests that in the unsuccessful

counseling dyads the client does not evidence statistically greater control than does the counselor.

Discussion

Clearly these results do not support Haley's contention that successful counseling is dependent on counselors' control over the definition of their relationship with clients--a relationship characterized as complementary with the counselor in the "one-up" position. In all fairness to Haley, however, it should be noted that clarification on a number of pending issues might suggest refinements in the theory and methodology of this study which might lead to more supportive results.

For purposes of this study, "control" (one-upmanship) and consequently complementarity were generally defined as a statistically significant difference between counselors and clients on the variable of Topic Control. It would seem to follow then, that failure to achieve such significance necessarily defined the relationships as symmetrical. This may not be a reasonable conclusion, however. At issue is the apparent categorical nature of relationship types. What seems more reasonable is that there may exist variations in the levels of Topic Control such that some relationships may be more symmetrical or complementary than others, depending on the amount of difference in Topic Control. While no statistically significant difference in Topic Control was found between successful and unsuccessful counselors, the lack of statistical significance does not necessarily equate with the absence of complementarity, neither does it necessarily equate with symmetry. This study's lack of support for Haley's assertion regarding the role of the relationship in promoting change may have been a function of the categorical operational definition of complementarity and one-upmanship.

The determination of client improvement was also a fundamental issue in this study. In the study, improvement (success) for a client was defined as a mean rating of 2 or above across each of the problems presented by the client. Although the behavioral referents used in the description of those improvement ratings, as well as the success criterion, both seemed to be reasonable (albeit, general) parameters for defining client improvement, the issue of "how much" change is necessary to satisfy Haley's assertions is not clear. It may have been too stringent [indeed for some (Weakland, Fisch, Watzlawick & Bodin, 1974), success may be determined by a "just noticeable difference" in only one presented problem]; or the criterion may have been too lenient. The effects of change in the improvement success criterion on the groupings of counseling cases and subsequently on the results of the study cannot be known.

The mechanism of relational control in counseling is a third issue. Strictly speaking, when Haley addressed the issue of relational control in Strategies of Psychotherapy (1963), he was referring specifically to control over a client's symptomatic behavior. Haley noted that it is imperative for the counselor to assume and maintain a one-up complementary relationship with respect to the client's symptomatic behavior if counseling is to be successful. In gathering data to assess the counseling relationship, Topic Control as a technique assessed all verbal transactions; its scope was not limited only to those transactions that referenced symptomatic behavior. It was therefore assumed for purposes of this study that Topic Control, as a global measure of relational control, accurately reflected the type of relationship established with respect to symptomatic behavior. Whether this was a fair assumption could not be adequately tested, and therefore its effects on the results cannot be known.

Related to the above is the issue of the nature of the problems presented in the cases used in this study. As just noted, discussing the issue of control, Haley specifically addresses symptomatic behavior in discussing the issue of control in counseling. He defines symptomatic behavior as behavior of a specific nature such that it is generally engaged in and simultaneously denied as being under the control of the person. Furthermore, symptomatic behavior is viewed as providing some sort of secondary gain for the person, and hence is used as a maneuver to control a relationship from which that secondary gain is derived.

In looking at the cases used in this study, the authors noted that the nature of the problems presented by clients to the counselors were primarily vocational. Although the vocational problems presented were <u>real</u> problems for the clients, one may question whether they can legitimately be viewed as representing "symptomatic behavior." Certainly it would be possible for a vocational concern to be a symptomatic behavior in an interpersonal context; however, it remains questionable whether such was the case in the current study. To the extent that client problems (whether improved or unimproved as a result of counseling) could not be considered "symptomatic," the legitimacy of the results as non-support for Haley's assertion must be questioned.

A further concern regarding the role of symptomatic behavior in therapeutic relationships has to do with the concept of "stages" in the progression of the counseling relationship (Cashdan, 1973). Cashdan suggests that the counseling relationship is characterized by a series of five stages: (1) hooking, (2) maladaptive strategies, (3) stripping, (4) adaptive strategies, and (5) termination. He suggests that it is

during the second stage that the counsehor begins to encounter the client's symptomatic behavior (i.e., the client's maladaptive interpersonal strategies). During the third stage, the counselor interacts with the client in such a manner as to prevent the client's symptomatic behavior from providing secondary gain. It is during this stage that the counselor would most particularly establish a one-up complementary relationship with respect to the client's symptomatic behavior.

In the current study, the individual cases were analyzed with respect to Topic Control across the entire case--and therefore across all stages in the process. Consequently, the means used in the statistical analyses represented the average of Topic Control across all stages for each case. The question arises whether the mean scores accurately reflect the type of relationship the counselor established with the client with respect to the client's symptomatic behavior, or whether that important aspect of control in the counseling relationship is washed-out or blurred by summing across the duration of the encounter.

The above caveats notwithstanding, it can only be concluded that the results of this study failed to support our operationalization of Haley's contention that successful counseling relationships are complementary with counselors in the one-up position. While the logic of Haley's assertion is persuasive, further research which takes into consideration the points raised above is necessary to establish his position empirically.

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Table 1 Topic change/initiation criteria
(modified from Tracey, et al., 1981)

1. A different topic,

   Example: A. How long have you been having these problems with your family?

   B. I once took a course in counseling that I have a lot of unanswered questions about.

2. A reference to a different person,

   Example: A: This family problem has had quite an impact on you personally.

   B: My sister is currently seeing someone at the counseling center.

3. A reference to a different time,

   Example: A: What are you feeling as we talk about this?

   B: All last week I felt awful about this.

4. The outright denial of the previous utterance,

   Example: A: It's obvious you worry about this problem a lot.

   B: It really doesn't bother me in the least.

5. A spontaneous change to a different level of specificity,

   Example: A: I understand you to say there are problems in your family.

   B: My family never does anything fun together.

6. Failure to comply with a request for greater specificity,

   Example: A: Give me an example of what would be fun to do with your family.

   B: We really haven't done anything fun in a long time.

7. An interruption,

   Example: A: Can you explain to me . . .

   B: I just can't stand being at home, it's so boring!

   A: . . . why your family never does anything fun together?

Table 2 Criteria for Problem Outcome Index Assignment

Score	Criterion
0	The client either introduced or acknowledged the problem but refused to pursue any further discussion of it.
1	The client talked about the problem but made no obvious attempt to entertain any solutions.
2	The client verbalized the problem and verbalized the intent to pursue a specific course of action or change.
3	The client reported a successful experience from counseling.

Table 3 Means and Standard Deviations for Successful and Unsuccessful Counseling Dyads on the Topic Control Measure

Proportion of successful topic change initiations

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Topic Control		
Successful Dyad (N=7)		
Counselors	.774	.129
Clients	.708	.078
Unsuccessful Dyads (N=11)		
Counselors	.809	.062
Clients	.746	.081